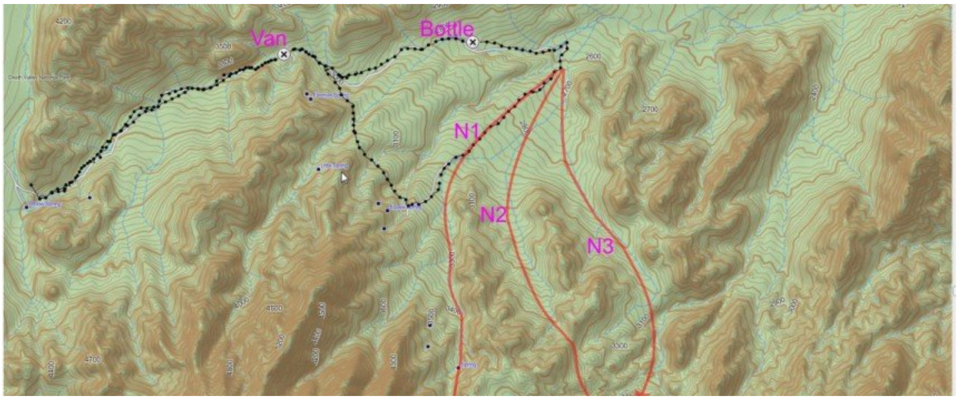
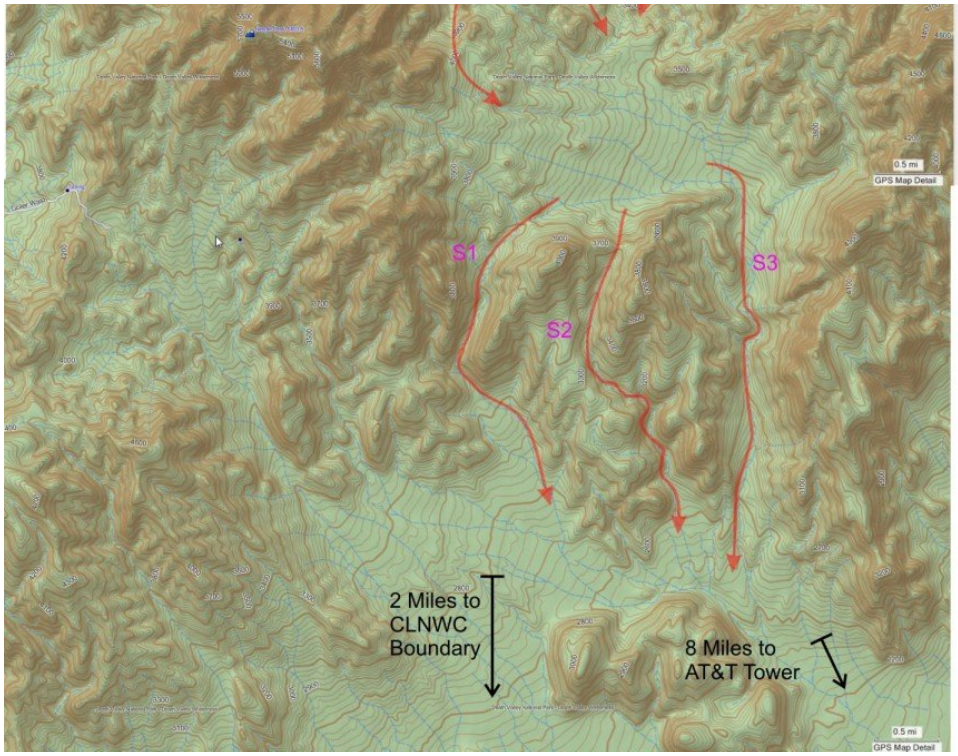
OtherHand

“Tom, we have some bones here….”

At this point I was rather excited. I finally had a theory for what happened that appeared to explain all the known facts. I wrote it up and quickly sent it out to those people I had been corresponding with on this project. I generally received back supportive, if wary feedback. Seems like everybody’s gotta have a scenario. It probably didn’t matter either way, because now I was on a roll. I set about studying this southerly alluvial fan intently and looking for some way to explore it.

As mentioned, the area was about 1.5 miles by 2 miles in size. The topo maps showed three canyons running southerly from Anvil Canyon up to this area, (I arbitrarily labeled them N1, N2 and N3 on the map shown) with the easterly most canyon being the largest and easiest to traverse. The westerly most canyon passed near Squaw Spring. For anyone desiring to continue south beyond this upper area, there were only three feasible routes, labeled S1 through S3 on the attached map. Two of them consisted of washes, a large one at the southeast corner and a smaller one at the southwest corner. In between these there was a saddle in the hills that joined into a middle wash running southward. Once south of this upper area, it was only a few miles to the boundary of the China lake military property and not an extreme distance to the AT&T relay tower.





Possible routes south of Anvil Canyon (T. Mahood)

As I was wrestling with this problem, I managed to track down the email address of the individual who allegedly found the German canteens. Having studied the maps, it was fairly obvious to me how he could have easily ridden a motorcycle through that area. I was anxious to contact him and see if he could provide any details about the area or what he saw. I sent out a very delicately worded query(considering what he did was illegal) explaining what I was up to, but unfortunately never got a response until it didn’t matter anymore.

It was clear that exploring the upper alluvial fan was going to be a problem due to lack of water. The only reliable source of water in the field was Squaw Spring, and that was two miles north of the area. Charlie Callagan of DVNP had suggested Squaw Spring as a possible source of water to carry up to the upper area and cache for expeditions.

The pace of my planning was accelerating. On October 31st I sent out an email to a number of individuals proposing an expedition in the near future to this upper alluvial fan by way of Squaw Spring. The idea was to take on water at the spring and carry it up to the search area, making camp for two nights. The water would allow for one full day’s searching, then return out via Anvil Canyon on day three. Unfortunately, most were busy (or it sounded too stupid for them!) and I received minimal response. But at this point I wasn’t about to let it go, so I convinced one of my RMRU teammates, Les Walker to come along. So early on the morning of November 11th, 2009, I picked up Les in Riverside and we blasted out to the wilds of Death Valley.

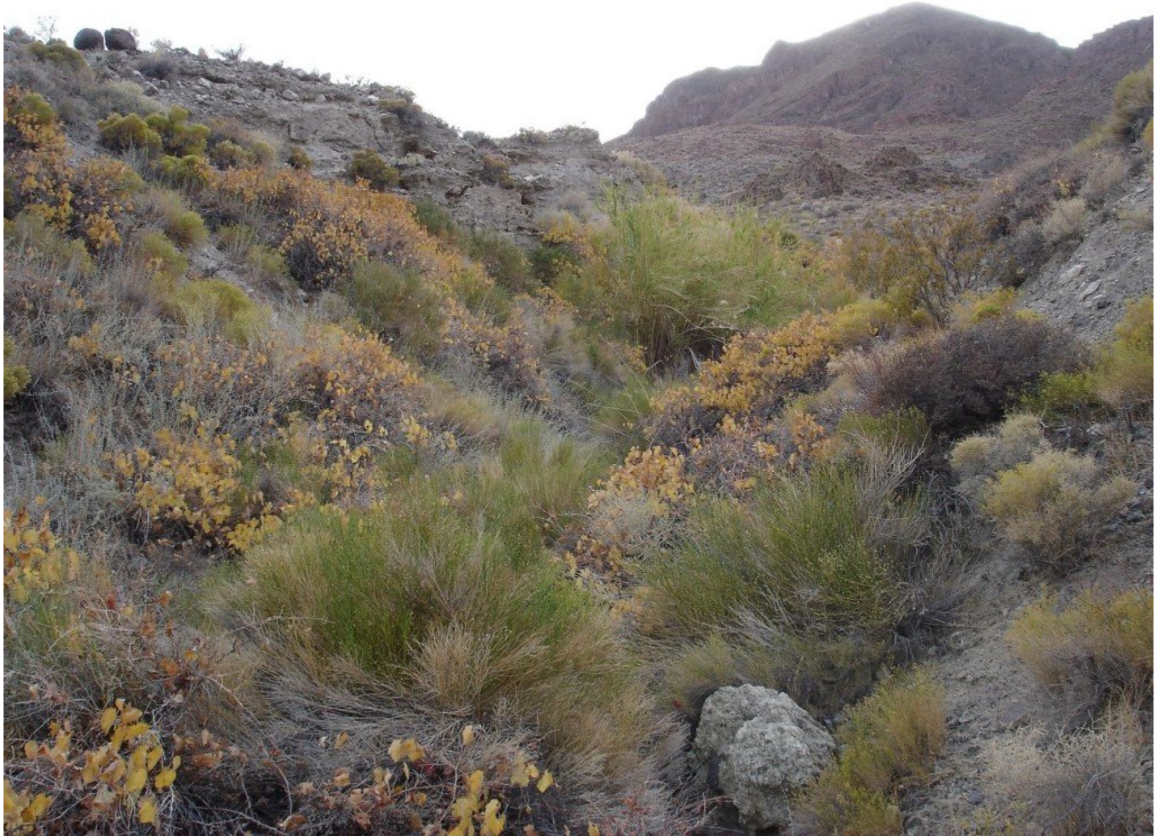
This outing was to be a bit more “participatory” than some. In addition to the usual PLB I carry, Les was bringing along a SPOT satellite tracker. He set it up to periodically report our location to overhead satellites, which would relay the points to a web page showing Google Maps. People whom we invited, (family members, RMRU team members, etc) would be able to observe our location in near real time on that web page as the trip progressed. We also took the precaution of notifying staff at DVNP as well as Debbie of CLMRG of our plans in case something went weird. Not that that ever happens.....

After passing through the gloriousness that is Baker yet again, and feasting on minimart goodness, Les and I made it to the trailhead and started down Anvil Canyon about 11:30 AM on a wonderfully cool and sunny day. Les wanted to see both the van and bottle location, both of which we reached surprisingly quickly. From the bottle bush we turned south and headed almost straight for Squaw Spring. This turned out to be a pretty hard climb, or maybe it was that our packs were full. Either way it sucked, but it was about to suck even more.

We reached Squaw Spring around 2 PM and proceeded to search for any open water with which we could “top off our tanks”. This was somewhat of an abort situation for us. If we were unable to find extra water at Squaw Spring, we had just enough with us to proceed to our planned camp site high on a corner of the upper alluvial fan, spend the night and return out immediately the next morning. So water, at this point, was rather important if we were to do any real searching.

Unfortunately, that was proving to be a bit difficult. We spent about 30 minutes searching through the green clump of trees and brush on the hillside to no avail. Lots of growth, but no open water from which we could pump from. Our concern level started to rise. Next we checked one of the adjacent ravines with lush green growth. Again, no water. Finally, a short distance from our original target, we found a ravine thick with reeds, which contained a small but nice pool of water. Les whipped out his filter and began pumping into a 2-1/2 gallon collapsible container I had brought.

The container Les was filling was one of those ideas I get that I perhaps should have thought through a bit more. It had a handle on it, and I guess I just figured I’d carry the damn thing as we hiked along. But by now the terrain was rugged enough that with a full pack on I really needed to use both my hiking poles as stabilizers. That was going to make carrying 20 pounds of water (also known as 2-1/2 gallons!) very difficult. I found I still had barely enough room in my pack to stuff the container in, which I did, and was able to offload some of my other heavy items to Les. This still left me with a pack in the 65 pound range, and two miles of off-trail climbing to go.



Squaw Spring – The only water for miles around was right here (T. Mahood)

Our planned route was a canyon just a bit east from Squaw Spring which we planned to take south all the way to its very head. This would put us at the northwest corner of the area we were interested in searching. The segment from Squaw Spring east to the canyon was very annoying, as it required us to traverse multiple ravines along the way. The extra weight just made it all the more special. The route up the canyon, while steep, was amazingly scenic, with fantastic cliffs along the west side.

Finally, at 4:45 PM as darkness was falling we crested the head of the canyon and reached our planned campsite. This was the first view of our planned search area, and my first thought was, “Uh oh…This will take at least several trips to cover”, which wasn’t exactly appealing now that I fully appreciated just how nasty it was to get here.

My tent at the camp site the following morning (T. Mahood)

The campsite was very exposed and the wind was picking up, making things difficult. We spent more time than we should setting up the tents and getting settled in and didn’t finish until it was very dark. Given the cold and windy conditions and not being able to have a fire, we each retreated into our sleeping bags and tents early for what passes as backcountry camping in the new millennium: Les spent a few hours listening to an MP3 book, while I killed time watching movies on my iPhone. Ain’t technology grand?

We were both up early the next morning, eager to get started. The weather had improved somewhat and the winds had died. We dropped most of our gear at our camp, and blissfully switched to daypacks for the day. We thought we might return to our camp for lunch, and planned to split the day into two search areas.

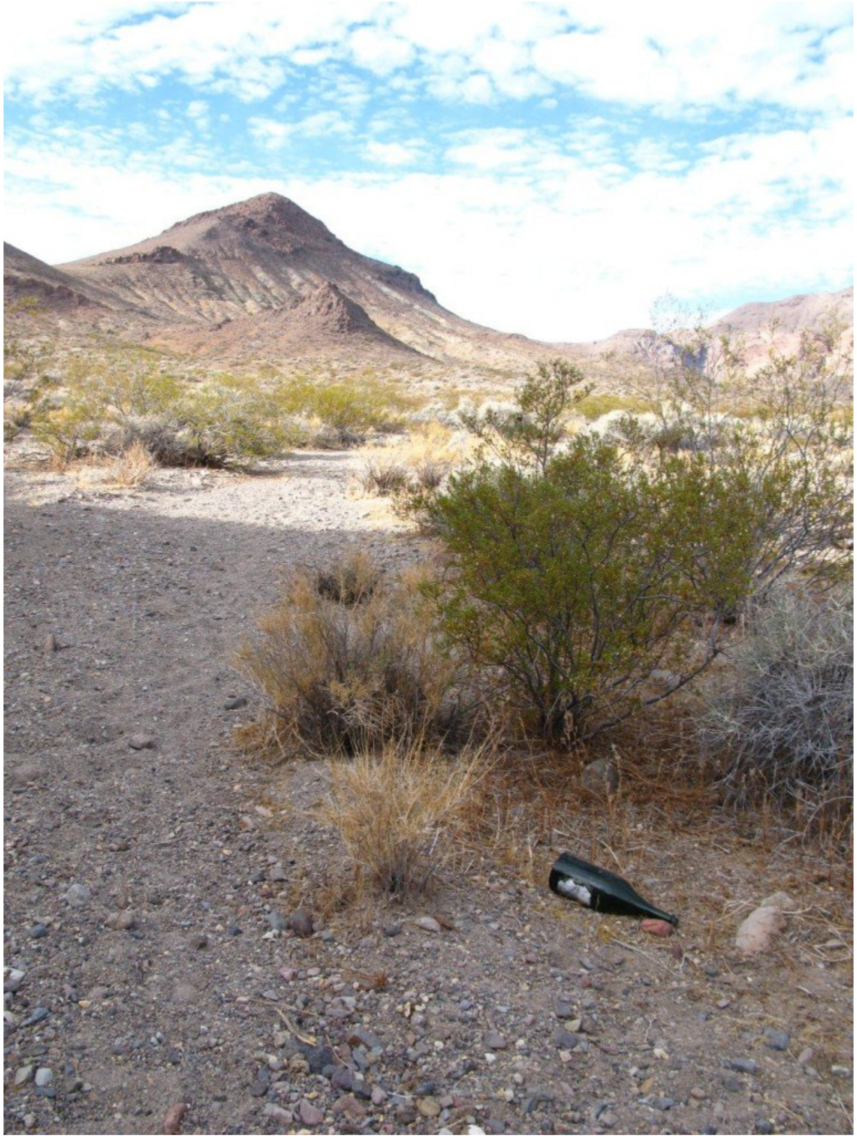
We set off from our camp around 7 AM and headed due south along the westerly edge of our search area. Our general plan was to search the perimeter of the rectangular search area, paying special attention to the southerly edge. As we moved south, we travelled a few hundred yards apart to maximize our search coverage. We kept in contract by radio or just yelled. As we moved south, the remaining clouds cleared and we were rewarded with an amazing view of the east slopes of Needle Peak. We also realized that very few people had ever seen what we were seeing, as remote as the area was.

Heading south from camp, looking west toward Needle Peak (T. Mahood)

Shortly before 8 AM we reached the southwesterly corner of our search area. This was a wash that continued southerly (Route S1), and was one of the three routes out of the search area for someone heading south. It looked to be a wide and an easy route, but we saw no signs of human passage. So we turned left and began moving easterly along the southerly edge of our search area.

As we continued on, I noticed the saddle in the hills ahead. It was the second of the three possible routes south, S2, and was worth a look. So I moved up along the south hills while Les followed the wash easterly along the base of the hills.

At 8:43 AM, when I had reached a point a hundred feet from the saddle, the radio crackled. It was Les, saying he had found a wine bottle. A wine bottle? Now that was odd. I heard Les mention something about it having a label, and my hopes dropped a bit, as I’d expect any label to be long gone after 13 years. Then he corrected it to say, no, there were only a few label fragments on the bottle. At this point I knew that we probably had enough with that one bottle to get other search teams out in the area. But I still needed to check the saddle and continued up with lessened enthusiasm since Les was below
and finding interesting things.



The wine bottle, as originally found (L. Walker)

Again, the radio went off. Les was reporting seeing what looked like toilet paper in the bushes. Huh?? Toilet paper lasts only a short time in this sort of environment. Closer inspection by Les showed it to actually be pages from a daily planner….with printing in German! At this point it was clear Les had found something very significant down below, but I needed to finish searching the saddle before joining him.

By now I had reached the saddle and was struck by the sweeping vista to the south. While the route below me, heading off to the south, looked like a very easy path, there was nothing to be seen off in the distance. Just vast, empty spaces. I was interrupted by the radio again, “Tom, we have some bones here….” It was time to rejoin Les.

Looking south from the saddle, the possible S2 route (T. Mahood)

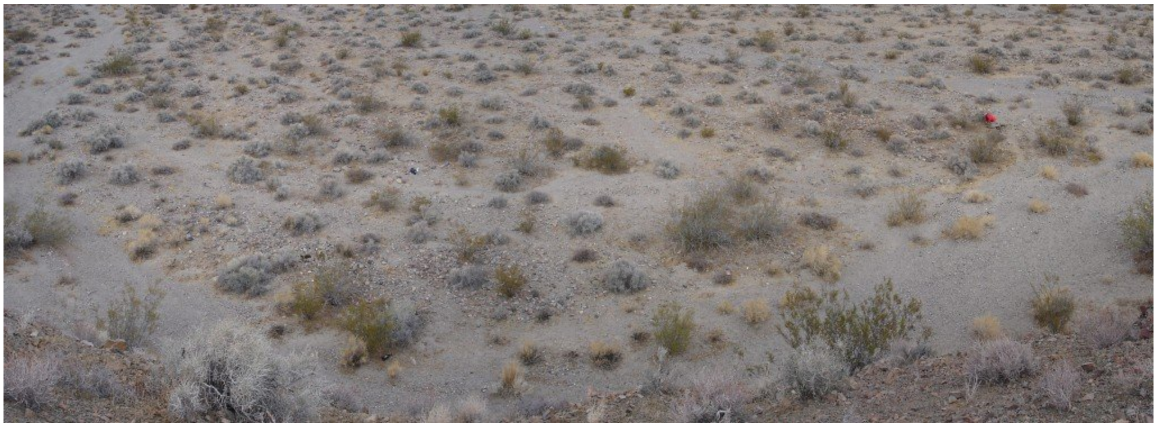
Before I left the saddle, I took the time to do a panoramic shot, looking northerly, which encompassed the entire alluvial fan. It’s shown below. That’s Needle Peak on the left side and Surgarloaf on the right. The darker hills in the distance are the northerly slopes of Anvil Canyon. The site, where Les was at the moment, is identified.

Panorama from saddle, looking north, site labeled (T. Mahood)

Les's spot was about 600 meters away from me to the northeast, and I hurried to descend. By the time I arrived, I found Les at the base of vertical, north facing 30' cliff at the north end of a small hill. It was 9:14 AM. I was standing on the top of the hill, looking down on the scene. I could see a number of white items, which were clearly skeletal remains, scattered over a wide area. As I was headed down from the saddle, Les had found a wallet full of ID cards. They all said Cornelia Meyer.

Closer view of small bluff, in center of image (T. Mahood)

We spent the next hour carefully examining the site. The debris was scattered over perhaps 150 meters, but seemed to radiate out from the cliff face. There was a small but active wash near the base of the cliff (which Les had been following), which seemed to disperse some items slightly downstream. We observed multiple items we believed associated with Cornelia, due to their proximity with her ID (including her passport and bank ID with photo). Les found a toothbrush and a tube of some sort of salve or toothpaste. In a small side wash to the northwest, we found remains of a small shoe that could have been a woman’s shoe or that of a child. We found portions of Cornelia’s daily planner, with numerous business cards from places the Germans had stayed on their trip. In addition to the two liter wine bottle, we found a clear bottle about 70’ downstream (This was later identified as one of the Bud Ice bottles from the van).



Site panorama looking down from top of bluff. Wine bottle at lower left. (T. Mahood)

Bud Ice bottle, later matched to those in van (T. Mahood)

But the more time we spent exploring, the more perplexed we got. We are anything but anatomy experts, but it seemed as if we were seeing the remains of only one person: Cornelia. And all the other items also seemed to point to Cornelia. Where were Egbert and the kids? Apparently our mystery wasn’t over yet. But we were impressed with one amazing fact: To reach this spot required them to have hiked 8 or 9 miles over rough terrain, in street shoes, in July. In my mind they had earned a lot of respect for this accomplishment. This was a tough group.

Me taking GPS reading on shoe (L. Walker)

As we took an overall look at the location, we noted the connection between the saddle and the cliff face. They were in direct line of sight of each other. Also the cliff area was one of the very few shady areas to be found for quite a distance. Was Cornelia waiting at the base of the cliff, alone but for a couple of water bottles, for Egbert and the kids to return from somewhere south of the saddle? As far as the Germans knew, the China Lake military boundary, and their hoped for salvation, was only four miles to the south. Did Egbert take the kids and head south, never to return? We couldn’t tell, but we knew we had enough to finally crack a 13 year old mystery. Now all we had to do was get the information out.

We decided what we found was of enough magnitude to cut short our search plans and report in to DVNP headquarters at Furnace Creek as soon as we could. It was also a great excuse not to have to spend another night out. At this point it was just after 10 AM, and we knew that if we hustled we could get all the way out and to Furnace Creek before things closed at 5 PM. We figured we were just under two miles from our camp, then another 9 miles to get back out to the truck. What with the hiking we had already done that morning, it was shaping up to be a long day.

Before we departed, Les and I decided to bring back some of Cornelia’s ID as proof that we weren’t just morons jumping to conclusions. We were aware of the evidentiary nature of the stuff, but it had been sitting in a wash for 13 years, so we weren’t likely to mess up anything. We chose items we wouldn’t damage in transit and we certainly didn’t disturb any of the skeletal remains. So we carefully packed up the wallet with the ID cards and started off.

Looking SE toward bluff, in center of image, as we hike back to camp (T. Mahood)

We reached camp in about an hour, rested a bit then packed up and headed down canyon. It was especially painful to dump all that extra water we now didn't need, but we lightened our loads to the minimum. We wondered what the people back at home who were following our progress via the SPOT tracker were thinking. They had seen a casual hike in the morning, then an intense and long period in one location, then a straight line back to camp and heading out early. They must know something is up.

After a long and dreary slog, but moving as fast as we could, we reached the truck at about 2:20 PM. We knew that we had a good 1-1/2 hours before we would reach the pavement of Badwater Road, then maybe an hour before we could reach Furnace Creek. At that pace the park offices would be closed and reporting in would be more difficult. But we had a trick up our sleeves we'd hope to play.

Generally, there is no cell phone coverage in Death Valley (*Note: This was before the cell tower was installed at Furnace Creek*). In some high spots, with the right provider, maybe. But you're pretty much out of luck. On our way into Butte Valley, Les still had his iPhone on and noticed there was a spot along Warm Spring Road, between Westside Road and the mouth of Warm Spring Canyon, where he suddenly got 3 bars of signal. It was a very small area, maybe ¾ mile long, and probably was connecting to a cell tower far to the south at Dumont Dunes. But we knew it provided us the opportunity to make some calls.

Sure enough, just after 4 PM as we approached the spot our phones lit up with routine, incoming email. I quickly sent off a short email to Debbie that we had found what appeared to be Cornelia, along with ID, and were headed toward Furnace Creek to report in. I also called Charlie Callagan of DVNP who had been one of the original searchers and had been helpful to us. Unfortunately it went to voicemail, so I hoped he would get it by the time we got to Furnace Creek. After Les finished his calls, we blasted off into radio silence again and turned north at high speed.

The less said about our speed as we drove toward Furnace Creek the better. I'm not certain what the statute of limitation on speeding in a national park is. Suffice to say we screeched into the visitor center parking lot at 5:02 PM, two minutes after closing. Les had put on an RMRU tee shirt and I had put on an RMRU cap in an attempt to show were weren't just your average wankers coming out of the desert (even though, in fact, we were). As we came up to the locked door, we saw there was still a ranger putting some stuff away behind the counter. We knocked on the door and motioned to her in a manner that was meant to convey both urgency and coolness, as there were some tourists outside sitting next to us, looking at maps. As the ranger came toward the door, I was trying to figure out how to whisper to her through the glass that we had found human remains in the backcountry and needed to speak with an adult-type person. But she suddenly saw our RMRU logos and said, "Oh, you're the rescue guys. They're waiting for you out back."

Let the commotion begin. We were brought back into the DVNP offices behind the visitor center where a couple of the staff and the chief ranger waited for us. As soon as he saw the bag we had with Cornelia's ID, he got a bit upset and rather sternly told us we shouldn't have done that. But being RMRU members, Les and I are used to being in various forms of trouble and are good at smiling dumbly and offering up a quizzical, "huh?" But after we flashed our Riverside County RMRU cards and the ranger remembered working with RMRU when he was at Joshua Tree years ago (good memories, surprisingly), things calmed down and it warmed a bit. And when the park's law enforcement folks arrived, they seemed thrilled to have the ID materials as it gave them a somewhat positive, if tentative, ID. They spent about a half hour photographing the items in detail.

As Les and I were assigned to writing out individual narratives of what happened (who writes anything in long hand these days??!) more staff streamed in saying they had heard one of the Germans had been found. We could hear outgoing phone calls being made. At one point I heard someone say on the phone describing Les and I, "Yeah, these guys are 'enthusiasts.….'". I dug my pen a bit deeper into the paper after hearing that oh-so-complimentary moniker..

With all the comings and goings, it was hard to tell who was who and what they did. Eventually Les and I were put on the phone with an Inyo County Sheriff's Office investigator and answered some of his questions. He asked if we would be willing to stay over until morning when he could arrive and more thoroughly interview us at 8 AM.

As much as we would have liked to have left for home, we reluctantly agreed. Adding a bit of injury to that situation was while DVNP was more than willing to offer us a free campsite if we wanted to camp overnight, if we wanted a real room at Furnace Creek Ranch, well that was our problem and our cost. I suppose we could have just snuck off. It was now about 7 PM and we had been without food other than energy bars for most of the day in an effort to get in ASAP, had hiked 14 miles that day and were dirty and crusted with sweat and sunscreen. My credit card came flying out pretty quickly. Once we had secured a room, Les and I dragged our tired butts over to the cafe and finally had a decent meal.

Both Les and I were up early the next morning and showed up at park HQ well before 8 AM. One of the rangers came out and said we were wanted at the airstrip, about a half mile away. Waiting there, we saw some Inyo SAR members, officers from the Inyo County Sheriff's Office and a Seahawk helicopter. They needed one of us to accompany them back to the site in the helicopter and show them what we found. Les generously suggested I accompany them, and he'd stay back and speak with the Sheriff's staff.

Getting into the Seahawk I was put in a single, rear-facing seat behind the pilots. There were another three people facing me, who I didn't quite know but assumed they were with the Inyo Sheriff's Office. Rounding out the crew were a couple of flight officers, resting comfortably on the floor with their harnesses clipped in to the cabin. After being given a helmet, goggles and ear protection, we lifted off and began the 40 mile flight south.

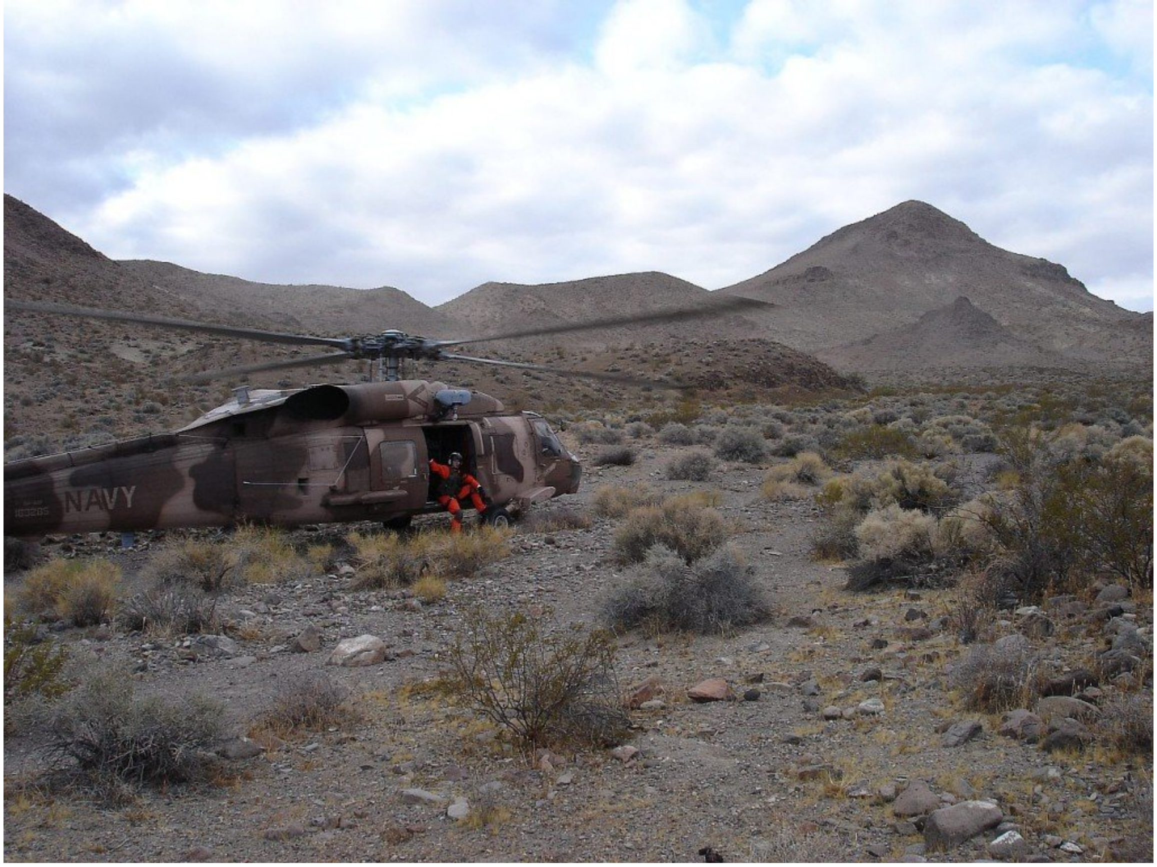
I knew the pilots had been given the GPS coordinates of the site, so I sat back to enjoy the flight, straining to turn around and follow our route. Despite my awkward seat, I was able to keep good track of where we were, passing Telescope Peak and over Hanaupah Canyon. Finally I could see the massive Striped Butte in Butte Valley and knew we were just about there. Oddly though, we were now moving away from Anvil Canyon and the site.

I got the attention of one of the flight officers and began shaking my head, and pointing off in a different direction from our course. In the din of the Seahawk, it was next to impossible to communicate without a headset, and I didn’t have one. As the helicopter slowly turned, the flight officer pulled off one of my hearing protectors and yelled that there had been a bust in the GPS coordinates, and that what the pilots had been given was obviously miles from the site. But through a happy random happenstance, I had my GPS unit in my parka pocket. I quickly pulled it out, turned it on and locked in on to the waypoint I had saved for the site. Unfortunately, the metal shell of the fuselage was shielding the GPS signal and it couldn’t acquire the satellites.

At this point the second flight officer realized what was up, moved over to me and motioned to release my seat harness. He then placed a waist harness around me which was tethered to the ceiling. I wasn’t sure exactly what was happening, but it was starting to get very interesting. They next slid open the right cabin door and waved me over to the edge. OK, sure, fine, whatever. I handed the GPS unit, which was now acquiring a lock, to the flight officer and looked out the door. I could see Squaw Spring on the mountainside adjacent to us, and I knew we were now headed generally in the right direction. I leaned further out, emboldened by the harness and the death grip I had on the door handle, and pointed out the course. I could see from my GPS in the hand of the flight officer that we were just over three miles from the site, and I could easily make out the bluff in the distance. As we continued on I kept a continual point on the location and could see the flight officer counting down the distance to the pilots and giving them course corrections. As we finally swung over the site, I kept my arm pointed at it as the others in the helicopter leaned forward to have a look. Even though we were still at least a hundred feet up, it was possible to see some scattered skeletal remains and I could see the excitement of the other passengers.

We set down several hundred meters from the site so as to not disturb it with the rotor blast and the passengers piled out. Having come from sea level at Furnace Creek to almost 4,000’, it was surprisingly cold and I was glad to have brought my parka shell. As the Seahawk departed to the north to bring back another group, I pointed out the major areas

Les and I had found, then hung back to let the professionals do their thing. I ended up walking with one very pleasant individual who didn’t seem overly familiar with the case and was asking a lot of questions. Curious, I finally asked what agency he was with. “The FBI”, he replied. “Oh great”, I thought, as I did a rapid mental rewind of all that I had said to him as we had been walking, hoping for nothing dumb. Turned out it was fairly routine, as it was a case involving foreign nationals within a national park, so the FBI wanted a cursory look at it. The bonus to this was the reason we had the air support was to get the FBI agent into the site.

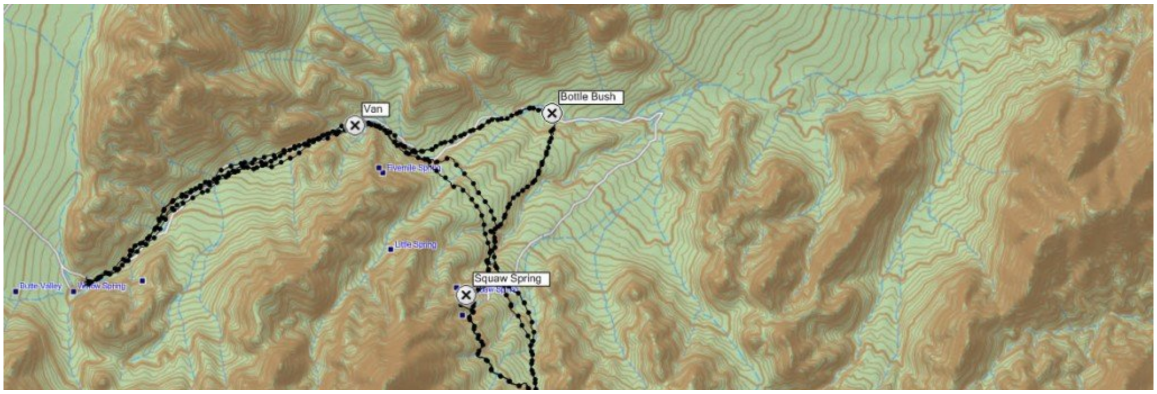


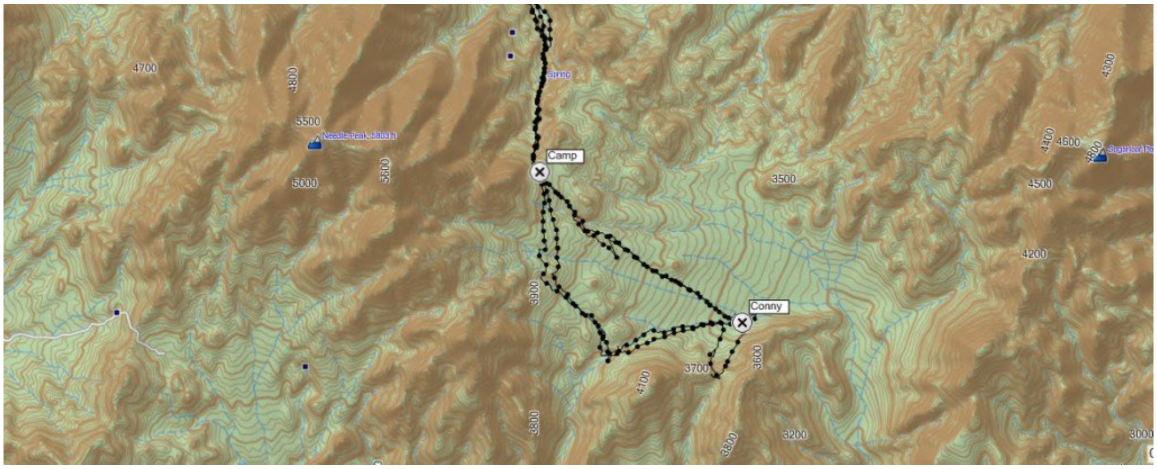
Seahawk at Site, bluff is under right rotor blade tips (T. Mahood)

Soon I heard the helicopter returning with more law enforcement and SAR personnel. I asked if I was needed any more, and was told I could go, so I was the only passenger on the return back to Furnace Creek. As we set down, I could see Les talking with an Inyo Sheriff’s Officer. Les had been filling him in on all we had done, as well as how we had figured it out. The investigator did ask Les where he was in July of 1996. Apparently he just looks suspicious. Whatever Les told him must had satisfied him, as I was really only asked for my contact info and that was it.

Here comes my ride home – Time to leave (T. Mahood)

It was now the late morning of Friday November 13th and we were finally cleared to leave. The Inyo Sheriff’s Office did request we minimize our contact with the press, as until the remains and other evidence could be removed from the site, they would be in jeopardy if the location were known. By the time we reached Barstow the news of our find was out on the wires.


Van
Bottle Bush
Fivemile Spring
Little Spring
Squaw Spring
Butte Valley
Willow Spring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GPS tracks for this hike (T. Mahood)

Next installment….

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